

TWO NATIONS?

Regional Partisanship and Representation at Westminster 1868-1983*

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The 1979 and 1983 general elections seemed to confirm two popular assumptions about British electoral politics – that there is a distinct polarization between ‘Tory’ England and ‘radical’ Scotland and Wales, and that the size of England means that Conservative Governments are thrust upon unwilling Scots and Welsh by the English majority. Certainly, in 1979 the Conservatives won 59% of the seats in England and 53% in the United Kingdom as a whole, but won only 31% of the Scottish seats and 37% of the Welsh seats. Although Labour support in Scotland and Wales, as elsewhere in the United Kingdom, declined in 1983 as compared with 1979, Mrs Thatcher’s 1983 ‘landslide’ still left Labour with 57% of the seats in Scotland and 53% in Wales.

Thus the immediate post-election reaction of *The Scotsman* in June 1983 was that⁽¹⁾:

“As usual, Scotland is distinctive and different...Here in Scotland it is the Conservative Party which has fallen below 30% of the vote... how many Scots can believe that they are being fairly treated when they get a Government which has only 21 of the 72 Scottish MPs?”

Similarly the *Glasgow Herald* observed that⁽²⁾:

“The elections have confirmed a separate voting pattern in Scotland and have also made it more complicated...70% of the Scottish vote was for non-Government candidates, and almost by definition this must bring the Scottish dimension to the fore again.”



But while the current partisan commitments of the component nations of the United Kingdom support the popular images of 'radical' Celts and 'Tory' English, what of the broader historical picture?

In comparison with elections over the longer term was the polarization between England and Celtic Britain exceptionally pronounced in 1979 and 1983, and were these elections typical in producing a Labour-dominated Scotland and Wales within a Conservative-dominated United Kingdom? Over the years has the English Tory commitment been more consistent, and more pronounced, than the radical commitment of the Scots and Welsh? Is the contemporary Scottish and Welsh support for Labour more marked than their earlier support for the Liberals? In which particular elections have the contrasts between the partisan preferences of English, Scots and Welsh been most marked? To what extent has England's partisan commitment been reproduced in the United Kingdom as a whole? Just how often have Scotland and Wales 'backed a loser' by electing more opposition MPs than government MPs?

These and other questions will be examined in this chapter through an analysis of the partisan commitments of the component parts of the United Kingdom over the longer term – specifically the period since 1868. Three particular matters will be dealt with. In Section One the consistency and intensity of each nation's partisan commitment since 1868 will be examined, and in Section Two those elections in which Britain has been most conspicuously 'two nations' will be identified. In Section Three the extent to which, over the years, an English pattern of partisan commitment has been reproduced in the country as a whole will be considered. In the concluding Section some of the implications of the historical patterns that emerge will be discussed.

I. Radical Celts and Tory English?

Over the years how consistent and how intense has each nation been in its partisan commitment? Table I shows the extent of each nation's partisanship, as measured by the average share of seats achieved by the region's dominant party in elections in each of five sub-periods since 1868. The sub-periods were achieved by dividing the pre-1914 and post-1945 periods so that each spans five to seven elections, and retaining the inter-war years as a single period. Here and throughout the paper the 1918 election is excluded from consideration because the nature of the contest on that occasion, between the Lloyd George Coalition and the several Opposition groups, defies analysis on conventional party lines. This leaves

twenty-nine elections from Gladstone's victory in 1868 to Mrs Thatcher's in 1983.

TABLE I

Party Dominance in Component Nations of the UK: General Elections 1868-1983 (By Period) ^a

Period (and Number of Elections)	Dominant Party by Nation and Period (Average % of seats)					
	UK	England	Scotland	Wales	Ireland ^b	
1868-86 (5)	Lib 51.6	Con 54.8	Lib 76.2	Lib 75.4	Nat ^c 70.0	
1892-1910 (6)	Con 45.4	Con 55.7	Lib 71.0	Lib 82.9	Nat 80.5	
1922-35 ^d (6)	Con 60.6	Con 65.2	Con 43.0	Lab 53.3	Union 86.1	
1945-59 (5)	Con 50.5	Con 51.0	Lab 51.0	Lab 74.3	Union 83.3	
1964-83 (7)	Con 49.4	Con 54.4	Lab 60.0	Lab 69.1	Union 87.6	
1868-1983 (29)	Con 50.1	Con 56.4	Lab 58.5	Lab 70.0	Union 85.8 ^e	

a Excludes 1918 election which defies analysis on conventional party lines.

b Northern Ireland from 1922

c Nationalist figure includes various 'Home Rule' factions for the elections of 1868-80

d Conservative figures include National Liberal and National Labour for 1931 and 1935.

e That is, the average for Northern Ireland 1922-83

Source:

D.E. Butler and A. Sloan, *British Political Facts 1900-79*, London, 1980; F.W.S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results 1932-85*, London, 1977; F.W.S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results 1885-1918*, London, 1974.

Analyses across time always raise questions of comparability, and this is certainly the case with a study of parties and elections over 115 years. The 'Conservative' label that is used here throughout the period embraces the Conservative Party of Disraeli, the Unionists (including the Liberal Unionists) at the turn of the century, the National Conservatives (and National Liberals and National Labour) of the 1930s, and the post-1945 Conservative party in its Churchillian, Butlerite and Thatcherite forms. In effect, 'Conservative' covers a succession of parties in organisational and ideological terms. The term 'radical', which is transferred from the Liberals

of the pre-1914 period to Labour in the post-1918 period, covers an even more fundamental organisational distinction, and an even greater ideological spread, than is the case with the Conservative label⁽³⁾.

Nevertheless, throughout the period under consideration it is possible to distinguish between a broadly right-of-centre 'Tory' party, and a broadly left-of-centre 'radical' party. It is this broad Tory-radical distinction that forms the basis of the analysis that follows.

The use of seats rather than votes as the measure of party performance will inflate somewhat the extent of a region's partisan commitment, given the tendency of the plurality electoral system to reward the winning party in a given region with more seats than it has earned in votes. Nevertheless, it is the regional composition of the parties' representation in Parliament, rather than their grass-roots strength, which determines the party that holds office, and which provides on the floor of the House a daily reminder of the regional contrasts between the parties.

The several extensions of the franchise have increased the electorate from approximately 16% of the adult population in 1868 to almost all adults today (now defined as those over 18 rather than 21). Similarly, the movement of population, and successive constituency boundary revisions to take note of this, mean that the constituencies are not distributed throughout the country in the way that they were in earlier periods. The electoral system, however, has retained its essential 'single-member constituency' and 'first-past-the-post' features throughout the period under consideration, so that the longer term comparisons are meaningful.

It can be seen from Table I that over the 1868-1983 period as a whole the popular images of radical Scotland and Wales and Tory England are broadly accurate. In Scotland the 'left' party (Labour since 1922 and the Liberals before that) has won an overall majority of seats in twenty-one of the twenty-nine elections, has won a simple majority in another two and achieved a 'draw' in another⁽⁴⁾.

The Scottish radical commitment, however, has varied in its intensity over the years. Between 1868 and 1910 the Liberals won a large majority of Scottish seats in every election except 1900. Indeed the Whigs or Liberals won a majority of Scottish seats in every election from 1832 to the end of the century. Between 1922 and 1955 the Scots were more ambivalent, and the Conservatives won a majority of Scottish seats as often as did Labour. Since 1959 Scotland has returned to its nineteenth century pattern of 'consistent radicalism', giving a majority of seats to Labour in each of the last eight elections.

Scotland's commitment to Labour has not equalled the extent of its nineteenth century attachment to the Liberals. Labour's best performance

in Scotland was in 1966, when it won almost two-thirds of the seats. The Liberals, in comparison, won over two-thirds of the seats in eight of the eleven elections between 1880-1910, and won over four-fifths of the seats in five of them.

Wales has been even more consistently and intensely radical in its commitment than has Scotland. The left party has won a majority of Welsh seats in all twenty-nine elections since 1968, and has averaged over 70% of the seats. As in Scotland, however, Labour has been unable to achieve quite the degree of success in Wales that the Liberals sustained before 1914. Only in 1964 and 1966 has Labour won more than three-quarters of the Welsh seats, whereas the Liberals managed this in eight of the nine elections between 1880 and 1910. From its 1966 peak of almost nine-tenths of the Welsh seats, Labour's performance in Wales has deteriorated in each of the last five elections, and in 1983 reached its lowest level since 1935. That said, Wales has sustained a remarkably consistent pattern of 'left' party dominance throughout the period.

Only England has been characterised by a consistent pattern of Conservative party dominance. The Conservatives have won a majority of English seats in twenty of the twenty-nine elections since 1868. Since 1885 the Liberals or Labour have won an *overall* majority of English seats only on three occasions (1906, 1945 and 1966).

The Conservatives achieved their greatest level of success in England at the end of the nineteenth century and in the 1930s. In post-war election wins the level of Conservative success in England has fluctuated within a fairly narrow band: even in 1983 the Conservatives won a smaller proportion of English seats than in most of their pre-1945 wins.

In 1983 the Conservatives did win a bigger share of English seats than Labour won of Scottish or Welsh seats, but generally the English have been less intense in their commitment than have the Scots and Welsh. Only on seven occasions have the Conservatives managed to win two-thirds of the English seats. Six of these elections were before 1945, and three were between 1886 and 1900.

Thus in partisan terms Great Britain has indeed long consisted of the 'two nations' of Tory England and radical Wales and Scotland. What is more, Ireland has constituted a 'third nation' characterised by an idiosyncratic pattern of dominance by 'home-grown' parties. In Northern Ireland the Unionists have won at least three-quarters of the seats in every election since 1922, and have averaged almost nine-tenths of the seats. The Nationalists were almost as successful in the all-Ireland elections of 1885 to 1910, winning around four-fifths of the seats on each occasion.

The broad images of Tory England, radical Wales and Scotland and

idiosyncratic Ireland, however, need to be qualified in two important respects. First, the dominance of a party within 'its' nation has been far from total. The Unionists did win all the seats in Northern Ireland in 1924, 1959 and 1964, and the Liberals came close to doing so in Wales in 1892 and 1906. Apart from these cases, however, each region has given at least 10% (and usually much more than 10%) of its seats to parties other than its dominant party in every election since 1868.

Labour (and earlier Liberal) success in Scotland and Wales has never been so complete as to deny the Conservatives a Celtic foothold. In 1979 and 1983 the Conservatives won almost a third of the combined Scottish and Welsh seats, and even in 1923 (the Conservatives' worst performance in Celtic Britain in a 'winning' election⁽⁵⁾) they won a sixth. Over the years the Conservative Party in Parliament has been disproportionately English, but has been far from exclusively so.

Equally, Tory England has always made a considerable contribution towards the Parliamentary majorities of Labour and Liberal governments. The Liberal governments' share of English seats ranged from just under half (in 1910) to over two-thirds (in 1906). Labour, in its election victories, has never won less than a quarter of the English seats, and has twice (1945 and 1966) won an overall majority of English seats.

Thus the nations of the United Kingdom have been *predominantly*, but not *exclusively*, Tory, radical and idiosyncratic in their respective commitments. Whichever party has been in power, the Government and the Opposition sides of the House have consisted of a regional mix – although (as is discussed in detail in Section II) the precise extent of the mix has varied from one Parliament to another.

The second major qualification to the national partisan images is that they do not necessarily apply to all of their regional sub-divisions. The notion of radical Scotland, for example, does not extend to Edinburgh or the rural north-east. Within Tory England, London normally returns a large majority of Labour MPs. Unionist dominance in Northern Ireland has distinct regional limits. In Wales there are some rural constituencies that have invariably resisted the radical tide.

Regional sub-divisions, of course, can be extended almost indefinitely. Within Tory Edinburgh, there are some Labour strongholds; within these Labour areas there are some staunchly Conservative pockets; and within them will be some predominantly Labour inner-pockets. The principal concern here is with the broad national sub-divisions of the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, the sheer size of England demands that it be sub-divided.

Table II shows for the regions of the south, midlands and north of

England the dominant party's average share of seats in each of the five sub-periods since 1868. The choice of these three broad divisions of England was partly pragmatic, in that election results for these particular regions were readily available for most of the period, and could be calculated for the rest of it⁽⁶⁾. South, midlands and north, however, are widely recognized regions of England, even though they are entirely unofficial divisions, and their boundaries are somewhat arbitrary⁽⁷⁾.

TABLE II

**Party Dominance in Component Regions of England:
General Elections 1868-1983 (By Period) ^a**

Period (and Number of Elections)	Dominant Party by Region and Period (Average % of seats)							
		England		South		Midlands		North
1868-86	(5) Con	54.8	Con	61.6	Lib	50.1	Lib	54.5
1892-1910	(6) Con	55.7	Con	65.2	Con	56.8	Lib	50.5
1922-35 ^b	(6) Con	65.2	Con	74.2	Con	65.9	Con	52.9
1945-59	(5) Con	51.0	Con	64.4	Lab	61.0	Lab	60.3
1964-83	(7) Con	54.4	Con	70.8	Lab	49.6	Lab	64.2
1868-1983	(29)Con	56.4	Con	67.7	Con	52.7	Lib/ Lab	53.0
a	Excludes 1918 election which defies analysis on conventional party lines.							
b	Conservative figures include National Liberal and National Labour for 1931 and 1935.							

Source:

D.E. Butler and A. Sloman, *British Political Facts 1900-79*, London, 1980; F.W.S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results 1932-85*, London, 1977; F.W.S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results 1885-1918*, London, 1974.

Of these three regions of England, the south provides much the clearest example of party dominance. In the period under consideration the Conservatives have won a large majority of seats in the south of England in each election except 1868, 1906 and 1945. The extent of the Conservatives' strength in the south of England has been almost as great as that of the Liberals and Labour in Wales. In all, the Conservatives have won three-quarters of the seats in the south in ten of the twenty-nine elections, and have averaged over two-thirds of the seats.

The midlands region has produced the most balanced pattern of party competition, with the Conservatives winning a majority of seats in

seventeen of the elections since 1868, and the 'left' party in twelve. This overall pattern, however, is a product of two contrasting periods. Before 1945 the Conservatives were clearly dominant in the midlands. They won a majority of seats in thirteen of the seventeen elections, and in eight of them won over 60% of the seats. Since 1945 Labour has been more successful, winning a majority of seats in eight of the eleven elections. In 1979, however the Conservatives achieved their largest share of the seats the midlands since 1935, and improved on this in 1983.

In the north of England the 'left' party has won a majority of seats in twenty of the twenty-nine elections. Again, however, there is a clear distinction between the pre-1945 and post-1945 periods. In the elections of 1868-1935 the north of England was the least consistent of all the regions, usually changing its allegiance at every other election, but since 1945 Labour has won a clear overall majority of seats in the north of England in each election. Thus in the north of England, as in the midlands, Labour has a better electoral record than had the Liberals before 1914 – the reverse of the pattern that is found in Wales and Scotland.

It is clear from Tables I and II that, taking the 1868-1983 period as a whole, there is a distinct south to north slope in the extent of the regions' commitment to the Conservatives. From the south of England, where the Conservatives have won a majority of seats in all except three of the elections since 1868, the extent of Conservative success declines northwards.

This overall pattern, however, has not persisted throughout the period. The south of England has been the Conservatives' strongest region in all five sub-periods, but the other regions have changed position on the 'most Tory – least Tory' continuum from period to period. In the 1868-86 period the Liberals were marginally more successful in Scotland than in Wales; since 1945 Labour has usually done better in Wales and the north of England than in Scotland; in the 1945-59 period Labour did better in the midlands than in either Scotland or the north.

The extent of the Conservatives' success between the wars was unusual. In each region the Conservatives averaged a bigger proportion of seats in the inter-war period than in any other, and only in that period were there more regions with a Conservative commitment than with a 'radical' commitment. Thus while the Conservatives' 'southern strength and northern weakness' is a long-established feature of British electoral behaviour, the precise nature and extent of that pattern has varied over the years.

II. Two Nations

In which particular elections have the partisan contrasts between

English and Celts been most marked? An indication of this is given in Table III which shows for each election since 1868 the proportion of seats achieved in England on the one hand, and in Celtic Britain (that is, Scotland and Wales taken together) on the other, by the party that won the election. The elections are ranked according to the extent of the contrast between the winning party's levels of success in these two parts of Britain. Table III thus provides an 'index of Anglo-Celtic electoral polarization' for the period since 1868.

The range between the extreme points in the 'index of polarization' in Table III is considerable. At one end of the scale the Conservatives in 1922 won almost four times as many seats in England as in Scotland and Wales, and in 1923 and 1892 they won almost three times as many. In 1945, however, Labour came close to doing equally well in each of the two parts of Great Britain. The 1945 election was thus doubly distinctive – as the election in which the Anglo-Celtic polarization was least pronounced, and as the one election since 1868 in which the 'left' party won a bigger proportion of seats in England than in Wales and Scotland.

For the most part, Conservative wins have been accompanied by a greater degree of polarization between England and Celtic Britain than have the 'left' party wins. Labour's seven wins, together with the Liberal win of 1906, fill the bottom eight (that is, least polarized) places in Table III, while Conservative wins fill twelve of the fourteen top (most polarized) places. Indeed, the only Conservative victories that are in the lower half of the rankings are their wins of 1951 and 1955. In these two elections the Conservatives won a majority of seats in Scotland as well as in England, and this helped to produce (by the standards of Conservative wins) a relatively low level of Anglo-Celtic polarization.

The other elections that are conspicuously 'out of place' in the rankings are the Liberal wins of January and December 1910. After their triumph throughout Great Britain in 1906, Liberal support in 1910 slumped in England but was sustained in Scotland and Wales. Indeed, in Scotland the Liberals won more seats in January 1910 than in 1906. This produced in 1910 a much greater contrast between the two parts of Great Britain in the extent of the winning party's success than was the case in any of the other 'left' party victories since 1868.

In general, then, it is the left party wins that have reduced the contrasts between England and Celtic Britain while within this pattern Labour wins have minimised the differences even more than did Liberal wins. For the most part, Labour in its victories has achieved much the same level of success in England as did the Liberals in their victories. In Wales and Scotland, however, Labour has done appreciably less well than did the Liberals, averaging 'only' 62.2% of the Scottish and Welsh seats in its seven victories, compared with the Liberals' average of 83% for their six

TABLE III

**Anglo-Celtic Polarization in Regional Success of Winning Party:
General Elections 1868-1983^a**

Winning Party	Winning Party's Share of Seats		Index of Polarization (Larger share as a proportion of smaller share)	Rank Order		All
	Party	England	Scotland & Wales	Con Wins	Lib/Lab Wins	
1922	Con	63.5	17.9	3.55	1	1
1923	Con	45.4	17.0	2.67	2	2
1892	Con	57.2	22.1	2.59	3	3
1983	Con	69.2	31.8	2.18	4	4
1886	Con	73.0	33.7	2.17	5	5
1970	Con	57.1	28.0	2.04	6	6
1910J	Lib	41.2	82.7	2.01	1	7
1910D	Lib	41.0	80.8	1.97	2	8
1895	Con	75.2	38.5	1.95	7	9
1979	Con	59.3	30.8	1.93	8	10
1900	Con	72.8	40.4	1.80	9	11
1874	Con	62.1	35.2	1.76	10	12
1959	Con	61.6	35.5	1.74	11	13
1924	Con	73.0	42.5	1.72	12	14
1880	Lib	56.5	89.0	1.58	3	15
1868	Lib	53.6	81.3	1.52	4	16
1885	Lib	52.2	76.9	1.47	5	17
1935 ^b	Con	74.0	50.9	1.45	13=	18=
1955	Con	57.1	39.3	1.45	13=	18=
1951	Con	53.6	38.3	1.40	15=	20=
1931 ^b	Con	89.7	64.2	1.40	15=	20=
1964	Lab	48.1	66.4	1.38	6	22
1966	Lab	55.8	72.9	1.31	7	23
1906	Lib	67.1	87.5	1.30	8=	24=
1974F	Lab	45.9	59.8	1.30	8=	24=
1929	Lab	46.6	58.5	1.26	10	26
1974O	Lab	49.4	59.8	1.21	11=	27=
1950	Lab	49.6	59.8	1.21	11=	27=
1945	Lab	64.9	58.5	1.11	13	29

a Excludes 1918 election which defies analysis on conventional party lines.

b Includes National Liberals and National Labour.

victories. It is this factor that has produced the generally lower level of Anglo-Celtic polarization for the Labour wins than for the Liberal ones.

The extent of the polarization between England and Celtic Britain was much less pronounced in the Conservative wins of the 1930s and 1950s than in their earlier and later victories. In all, seven of the ten most polarized Conservative victories date from the 1920s or earlier, while the three most recent Conservative victories fill the other 'top ten' places. In 1970 and 1979 the Conservatives won almost exactly twice as many seats in England as in Scotland and Wales, and in 1983 they won more than twice as many. Even so, the extent of the polarization in 1983 was still much less marked than in the Conservative victories of 1892, 1922 and 1923.

The broad Anglo-Celtic division, of course, ignores the marked differences in the partisan commitments of the English regions that were revealed in Table II. Despite the overall English commitment to the Conservatives it is only the south of England that over the years has been consistently 'Tory': the midlands have been ambivalent, while the north of England (at least in the last forty years) has been predominantly 'radical'. Thus in addition to the Anglo-Celtic division of Great Britain there is a clear partisan division between 'Tory' south Britain (that is, the south and midlands of England) on the one hand, and 'radical' north Britain (that is, the north of England, Scotland and Wales) on the other.

In which elections has this polarization between 'north Britain' and 'south Britain' been most pronounced? Table IV provides a measure of this, showing for elections since 1868 an 'index of north Britain - south Britain electoral polarization' based on the winning party's share of seats in the south and midlands of England on the one hand, and the north of England, Scotland and Wales on the other. The elections are ranked according to the extent of the contrast between the winning party's performance in these two parts of Great Britain.

As with the Anglo-Celtic index, it is Conservative victories that have produced the greatest polarization between north Britain and south Britain, and 'left' party victories that have produced the least marked polarization. Conservative victories occupy five of the top six (most polarized) places in the rankings, while Liberal and Labour victories occupy four of the bottom five (least polarized) places. That said, each party's victories are distributed rather more evenly among the rankings in Table IV than is the case in Table III.

With both parties the pattern has been for the degree of polarization between north and south Britain to increase over the last forty years. In each of its post-war victories Labour has won around two-thirds of the seats in north Britain (though it did rather better than this in 1966), but in south

TABLE IV

**North-South Polarization in Regional Success of Winning Party:
General Elections 1868-1983^a**

Winning Party	Winning Party's Share of Seats		Index of Polarization (Larger share as a proportion of smaller share)	Rank Order		
	South Britain ^b	North Britain ^c		Con Wins	Lib/Lab Wins	All
1979	Con	71.9	31.7	2.27	1	1
1983	Con	81.5	37.4	2.10	2	2
1922	Con	72.0	36.5	1.97	3	3=
1910J	Lib	33.8	66.7	1.97		3=
1970	Con	66.6	33.9	1.96	4	5
1923	Con	51.9	21.1	1.92	5	6
1910D	Lib	34.8	64.3	1.85		7
1974F	Lab	35.5	64.9	1.83	3	8
1892	Con	63.9	35.3	1.81	6	9
1964	Lab	38.4	67.5	1.76	4	10
1886	Con	81.5	47.3	1.72	7	11
1974O	Lab	39.2	66.8	1.70	5	12
1959	Con	69.2	42.0	1.65	8	13
1929	Lab	37.6	61.4	1.63	6	14
1880	Lib	50.9	79.5	1.56	7	15
1895	Con	81.8	52.7	1.55	9	16
1924	Con	80.6	52.1	1.53	10	17
1966	Lab	47.7	72.6	1.52	8	18
1951	Con	60.1	39.1	1.51	11	19
1955	Con	63.1	42.7	1.48	12	20
1874	Con	65.7	44.3	1.47	13	21
1950	Lab	42.9	61.1	1.44	9	22
1900	Con	77.5	54.3	1.43	14	23
1935 ^d	Con	80.6	57.8	1.39	15	24
1885	Lib	52.0	68.6	1.32	10	25
1868	Lib	53.5	65.7	1.23	11	26
1931 ^d	Con	92.0	77.3	1.19	16	27
1945	Lab	60.2	68.1	1.13	12	28
1906	Lib	67.5	74.8	1.11	13	29

a Excludes 1918 election which defies analysis on conventional party lines.

b That is, south and midlands of England.

c That is, Scotland, Wales and north of England.

d Includes National Liberals and National Labour.

Britain Labour's share of the seats has declined from 60% in 1945 to not much more than a third in 1974. It is this variation in Labour's fortunes in the south and midlands of England, rather than in the country as a whole, that has been the key to the size of the party's post-war victories and to the extent of the polarization between north and south in those victories.

The pattern of increased polarization between north and south Britain is even more pronounced in the case of Conservative victories. From 1931, when the Conservatives did very well in both parts of Britain, successive Conservative wins have produced increasingly polarized results, and their victories of 1970, 1979 and 1983 fill three of the top five places in the rankings.

The particular extent of the polarization between north and south Britain in 1979 and 1983 was the product of exceptionally poor Conservative performances in north Britain, rather than unusually good performances in the south. Only in 1923 did the Conservatives do worse in north Britain (in a 'winning election') than they did in 1979, and their improved performance in north Britain in 1983 still left them with a smaller share of northern seats than in most of their wins.

The extent of the increase in the polarization that has taken place over the last fifty years is emphasised by the contrast between the Conservative 'landslides' of 1983 and 1935. In both elections the Conservatives won a similarly large share of the total seats in Great Britain⁽⁸⁾ – 69% in 1935 and 63% in 1983 (whereas in the 'super-landslide' of 1931 they won almost 90%). In south Britain the Conservatives did slightly better in 1983 than in 1935, but in north Britain they managed little more than a third of the seats in 1983 compared with almost 60% in 1935.

Taking Tables III and IV together, three particular points emerge. First, whether north and south are defined as 'England and Celtic Britain' or as 'south Britain and north Britain', Conservative victories have tended to produce a greater degree of polarization than have Labour and Liberal victories. Second, the most recent Conservative victories have produced a greater degree of polarization than have other elections in the post-war period, though in the case of the Anglo-Celtic divide the 1970, 1979 and 1983 elections have not exceeded the very high levels of polarization that prevailed in the Conservative victories of 1892 to 1923. Third, in 1979 and 1983 Britain was more conspicuously 'two-nations' if the two are defined as north Britain and south Britain rather than as England and Celtic Britain. Indeed, over the post-war period as a whole, the north Britain – south Britain divide has replaced the Anglo-Celtic divide as the most conspicuous regional electoral cleavage within Great Britain.

III. English Dominance

To what extent has an English pattern of partisan commitment been reproduced in the United Kingdom as a whole? Even allowing for the over-representation of Scotland and Wales in the House of Commons, England still accounts for some four-fifths of the seats. Thus a party that managed to win just under two-thirds of the English seats would have an overall majority in the Commons even if it did not win any seats at all outside England. Equally, even in the unlikely event of a party winning every seat in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, it would still need to win over a third of the English seats to achieve an overall majority.

In 1979 and 1983 the Conservatives won a majority of the seats in the south and midlands of England, but not in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, or the north of England. Just how unusual is this pattern? How often since 1868 have 'radical' Wales and Scotland been deprived of a Labour or Liberal government by Conservative success in England, and which of the nations, and which of the English regions have most often given a majority of seats to the party that won the election?

Taking the 1868-1983 period as a whole, England has not imposed its particular pattern of party dominance on the rest of the United Kingdom. The regional patterns of partisan commitment that were described in Section One have qualified each other to a remarkable degree. Within England the persistent Conservative success in the south has been qualified by the success of the 'left' party in the north of England and (at least in the post-1945 period as a whole) the midlands. In combination, these regional patterns have produced in England as a whole a less marked pattern of party dominance than is found in the other nations of the United Kingdom. In its turn, this relative English ambivalence has *qualified*, but not *nullified*, the more pronounced partisan commitments of the other component nations.

In the United Kingdom as a whole, there has been a relatively even pattern of party competition since the 1860s. The Conservatives have won sixteen of the twenty-nine general elections since 1868, twelve of the twenty-two since 1900, and six of the twelve since 1945. There is, however, a clear distinction between the inter-war period on the one hand, and the pre-1914 and post-1945 periods on the other. Between the wars, in what was essentially a transitional period of Liberal decline and Labour emergence, the Conservatives won large overall majorities in the Commons in four elections, achieved a simple majority in a fifth, and even denied Labour an overall majority in its one inter-war victory of 1929.

Before 1914 and since 1945, in contrast, the distinct national patterns of party dominance combined to produce a broadly even party balance of power in the United Kingdom as a whole. In the 1868-1914 period the Liberals won six elections to the Conservatives' five, and each party was in

office for almost exactly the same amount of time. Similarly, since 1945 Labour and the Conservatives have each won six elections, and have held office for similar amounts of time.

Thus over the longer term the United Kingdom pattern of party competition has *not* been a copy of the English pattern, and the political complexion of United Kingdom governments has *not* simply been a reflection of the English partisan commitment. The point is emphasised by Table V, which shows the frequency with which each region has 'backed the winner', in the sense of giving a majority of its seats to the party that won the election.

TABLE V

'Backing the Winner' and 'Being in Office': Regional Support for the Winning Party 1868-1983^a

	Elections When Region Backed Winning Party ^b (N)		Region's Time 'In Office' (as % of the period) ^c	
	1868-1983 (29)	1945-83 (12)	1868-1983	1945-83
England	24	9	88.7	89.5
North	22	6	79.1	45.7
Midlands	24	10	80.9	78.9
South	19	7	74.8	65.8
Scotland	19 ^d	8 ^d	72.2	65.8
Wales	13	6	48.7	45.3
Ireland ^e	11	4	33.9	34.2

- a Excludes 1918 election which defies analysis on conventional party lines.
- b That is, the region gave more seats to the party that won the election than to the main opposition party.
- c That is, the region had more MPs on the government side of the House than on the opposition side.
- d Includes 1951 when Labour and Conservatives won the same number of seats in Scotland.
- e Northern Ireland since 1922

The significance of being 'on the winning side', of course should not be over-stated. Unless a region gives all of its seats to the losing parties it makes some contribution to the government's overall representation in Parliament. Nevertheless, there is a clear distinction between a region

giving only a minority of seats to the party that wins the election, and actually 'backing the winner' by giving it a majority of seats. The distinction is not *constitutionally* significant, but can be significant in other practical respects.

The likelihood of a particular region 'backing the winner' in successive elections will be determined partly by the region's size, and partly by the flexibility of its commitment. The more populous the region, the greater the contribution that it will make to the overall result of the election, and thus the greater the likelihood that it will be on the winning side. At the same time, however, a region with a relatively small electorate could be on the winning side in every election if it was sufficiently flexible in its partisan commitment to transfer its support to the party that was nationally ascendant at a particular time. Given uniform partisan flexibility, every region could give a majority of its seats to the winning party in each election, and each government could claim to have been endorsed by every region of the country.

It can be seen from Table V that each region has had some success in backing the winner, but no region has been consistently successful in this respect. There has been a clear contrast between the Scots and English on the one hand, and the Welsh and Irish on the other. The consistent Irish support for their home-grown parties since 1885 has meant that they have been on the winning side only in the case of the Liberal wins of 1868 and 1880, and the nine Conservative wins between 1922 and 1970 when the Conservative-Ulster Unionist alliance was in operation. Consistent Welsh support for the 'left' party has meant that Wales has been on the winning side in only half the elections since 1868.

In contrast, Scotland has been on the winning side in two-thirds of the elections over the period as a whole, and England in four-fifths. Indeed, since 1900 the Scots have done almost as well as the English in this respect. Although the English and Scots have exhibited distinct partisan commitments, and have backed 'their' party in each of its election victories, their loyalties have been sufficiently flexible for them to give a majority of seats to the 'other' party in half of its victories. Although the Scots have failed to back the Conservatives in their last four victories, and did not do so in any of the Conservative victories in the nineteenth century, they did give a majority of seats to the Conservatives in six of their eight victories between 1900 and 1955.

England's ideological flexibility was most apparent at the beginning of the period, and England contributed a majority of seats to the winning party in all nine elections between 1868 and 1906. Since then England has backed the loser in five of the twenty elections – January and December 1910, 1950, 1964 and February 1974. It is not surprising that England, with the bulk of the seats in the Commons, has been on the winning side in most

elections. What is perhaps surprising is that England has failed to back the winner (or *determine* the winner) in as many as a quarter of the elections this century.

Thus the political complexion of United Kingdom governments has not simply been a reflection of the English commitment. Still less, over the longer term, have United Kingdom governments been a reflection of the commitment of the south of England. Of the three English regions, the north and midlands have been sufficiently flexible to give a majority of seats to the winning party in (respectively) three-quarters and four-fifths of the elections since 1868. In contrast, the south of England's commitment to the Conservatives (broken only by the Liberal and Labour landslides of 1868, 1906 and 1945) has meant that it has been on the winning side less often than the other two more ambivalent English regions.

In effect the south of England's support for the Conservatives has been sufficiently *consistent* to prevent a majority of southern seats going to the left party in its winning years, but has not been sufficiently *intense* to overcome on every occasion the left party's strength in north Britain. Thus, far from the south of England determining the political complexion of United Kingdom governments, the south has had to live with governments to which it has contributed only a minority of its seats in almost half of the elections since 1945, and in more than half since 1964.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The answers to the questions that were raised at the beginning of this paper can now be summarised.

1. While the images of 'Tory' England, 'radical' Scotland and Wales, and 'idiosyncratic' Ireland have been broadly accurate over the longer term, there are distinct limits to their validity. In particular, Scotland's radical image needs to be qualified in that Wales throughout the period, and the north and midlands of England since 1945, have averaged a larger proportion of 'left' party seats than has Scotland. While Labour has done appreciably better in Scotland since 1959 than it did between 1922 and 1955, it has still not matched the level of success achieved by the Liberals in Scotland in the nineteenth century.
2. Although throughout the period Great Britain has indeed consisted, in partisan terms, of 'two nations' (with Ireland as a separate 'third nation'), the extent of the polarization between Tory south and radical north has varied according to just how 'north' and 'south' are defined. The polarization between England and Celtic Britain was more pronounced in the period of Liberal-Conservative competition before 1914 than it has been in the modern period of Labour-Conservative competition, while the reverse is true of polarization between 'south

Britain' (that is, the south and midlands of England) and 'north Britain' (Scotland, Wales and the north of England). There was a greater degree of polarization between south Britain and north Britain in 1979 and 1983 than in any other general election since 1868.

3. An English pattern of Conservative party dominance has not been reproduced in the United Kingdom as a whole. The Scots have given a majority of seats to the party that won the election almost as often as have the English, and the supposedly dominant south of England has been on the losing side in more general elections than have the north, midlands or Scotland. Rather than reflecting an English pattern of Conservative dominance, the United Kingdom as a whole has had its own distinctive pattern of relatively even two-party competition.

It has to be emphasised again that the regional patterns that have been described in this paper are based upon the *seats won* by the parties, and thus reflect regional representation in Parliament rather than the regional distribution of electoral support. The British first-past-the-post electoral system distorts the relationship between votes and seats by giving the dominant party in any particular region a larger share of seats than it has 'earned' in votes. It thereby magnifies regional partisan differences. The regional contrasts would be reduced somewhat if the established electoral system was replaced by one that achieved a more precise relationship between the parties' votes and seats. The tendency for the established electoral system to exaggerate regional differences, however, is generally under-stated in debates about the desirability of electoral reform.

A major consequence of the regional patterns that have emerged from the established electoral system over the years is that successive British governments have been regionally unrepresentative to a quite marked degree. The government side of the House has been disproportionately 'southern' whenever the Conservatives have been in office, and disproportionately 'northern' when Labour or the Liberals have been in power. In none of the elections since 1868 has a party won a majority of seats in all six of the regions of the United Kingdom that have formed the basis of this analysis, and not since 1880 has a party achieved a majority of seats in each of the four nations. Even if idiosyncratic Ireland is excluded from consideration, only twice (1906 and 1945) has a party won a majority of seats in all five regions of Great Britain, and only on six occasions (all of them Liberal or Labour victories) has a party won a majority of seats in the three nations of Great Britain.

Within this general pattern of narrowly-based governments, however, the 1979 and 1983 elections produced a government with a particularly limited regional base. Since 1979 the Conservative benches have been even more disproportionately 'southern' than usual. For the first time since 1892 the winning party achieved a majority of seats in just two of the six regions

of the United Kingdom. Not since at least the 1850s have the south and midlands of England (as in the 1979 and 1983 Parliaments) accounted for three quarters of the MPs on the Government side of the House. In all, less than 10% of Conservative MPs elected in 1979 and 1983 came from Scottish and Welsh seats (the smallest proportion since the 1920s), and only 16% came from the north of England (the smallest proportion for a hundred years or more).

Constitutionally, of course, a government's position is unaffected by the extent of its regional support: a government holds office because it is supported by a majority of MPs, regardless of their regional origins. Politically, however, it is clearly undesirable for a government to have an exceptionally narrow regional base. Despite some temptation for a Government to woo those areas in which it is electorally weak, a region that has a disproportionately small number of MPs on the government side of the House is likely to be at a disadvantage in the Parliamentary battle for government favours. Certainly, regional justice is not seen to be done if a government does not have a broad regional base. This matters more today than in the nineteenth century, or even before 1945, because the electorate is now more sensitive to regional disparities. For the most part regional inequalities are regarded as undesirable, and the government of the day is seen as having an obligation to do something about them. The notion of 'regional mandates' is popular, and the government's legitimacy is questioned by groups that are dominant in particular regions.⁽⁹⁾

Given these considerations a regionally dominant party that today finds itself persistently in opposition might be tempted to 'play Parnell' and, like the Irish Nationalists in the 1880s, seek to emphasise its role as a champion of regional interests by obstructing the proceedings of Parliament. It might even be tempted to follow Sinn Fein's tactics after the 1918 election of boycotting Westminster and meeting as a regional assembly.

Clearly, the parallels between the 1980s and the 1880s, or 1918, cannot be taken too far. Among other things, the Irish Nationalists and Sinn Fein had specific and limited legislative objectives; they did not seek to present themselves as an alternative government of the United Kingdom; they held a bigger proportion of Irish seats than Labour holds of Scottish, Welsh or north of England seats; Parliamentary procedures in the nineteenth century gave greater opportunities for disruption than they do today. What is more, regional MPs who pursue such tactics ostracise themselves from the established processes of Parliamentary Opposition, and may undermine their party's credibility as a responsible United Kingdom force.

Nevertheless, as a means of drawing attention to regional discontents, the Parnell and 1918 Sinn Fein options might be attractive to a frustrated Opposition which feels that although it has lost two successive elections, it

is nevertheless the true voice of large areas of the United Kingdom. Certainly the prospect of a Labour-dominated Scotland within a Conservative-dominated United Kingdom, prompted Scottish Labour MPs to consider such tactics even in the last Parliament.

Regardless of whether Opposition MPs choose to adopt the Parnell or Sinn Féin options, or simply use the more conventional processes of inter-party debate to highlight the exceptional narrowness of the Conservative Government's regional base, the current situation has clear dangers for the established system of Parliamentary representation. The possibility is that, in the face of an extended period of office by an exceptionally narrowly based government, whole regions will become disillusioned with their continued under-representation on the Government benches and will prefer direct action to Parliamentary action as the means of bringing pressure to bear on Ministers.

In the past the significance of the regionally unrepresentative nature of British governments has been reduced by the fact that our governments have tended to be relatively short-lived. As has been shown elsewhere,⁽¹⁰⁾ the parties alternate in office much more regularly in Britain than in other European and Anglo-American countries. In Britain over the last 150 years there has been a change of party or parties in office every four years on average;⁽¹¹⁾ there have been only four governments that have survived for more than eight years;⁽¹²⁾ and 'Conservative' and 'non-Conservative' governments have held office for broadly equal amounts of time.

Thus over the years each region has seen 'its' party in office at fairly frequent intervals. It is true that Wales and the north of England were 'in opposition' (in the sense of having more MPs on the Opposition side of the House than on the government side) for the whole of the 1951-64 period of Conservative government, but that was an atypical experience. For the most part, since at least 1868 each region of Great Britain has alternated regularly between being 'in office' and being 'in opposition'.

It remains to be seen whether this pattern will continue in the immediate future. There are three main possible scenarios. The next general election might return a revived Labour Party to office with a regional pattern of support similar to that of the 1960s, thereby giving Scotland, Wales and the north of England 'their turn' in having a majority of their MPs on the Government side of the House. Alternatively, the established pattern of regional partisanship might not survive the strains to which it has been subjected in recent years. It is at least possible that the SDP-Liberal Alliance will threaten Conservative dominance in the south, and Labour dominance in north Britain, while the nationalist parties remain in the wings as other potential threats to Labour's current strength in Scotland and Wales. If the mould of regional party dominance is indeed broken in the 1980s and 1990s, and Britain experiences a succession of hung

Parliaments as a result, a coalition might emerge that will be broadly based regionally as well as ideologically.

A third distinct possibility, however, is that the Conservatives are currently launched upon an extended period in office, that a third successive victory will confirm them in office into the 1990s, with government benches that are at least as disproportionately southern as in the present Parliament. It should be realised that for the Conservatives to win a further general election with a majority of seats only in the southern half of England would be an unprecedented development. In their other long spells in office, in the 1950s, 1930s and at the turn of the century, the Conservative benches were much more regionally representative than in the 1979 and 1983 Parliaments. Certainly, Scotland returned a majority of Conservative MPs in 1900, 1924, 1931, 1935 and 1955 (and tied with Labour in 1951), and over the last hundred years Scotland has had the experience of being 'on the losing side' for no more than one Parliament at a time. In the context of the increased regional awareness of recent years, an extended period of office for a Conservative Government that holds only a minority of seats in Scotland, Wales and the north of England might well impose greater regional strains upon the political system than it has experienced since the Irish troubles of the 1880s.

References

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1. *The Scotsman* (leading article) 11 June 1983.
2. *Glasgow Herald* (leading article) 11 June 1983.
3. For the details of party classifications, and a comment upon the problems involved in party labelling, see F.W.S. Craig *British Parliamentary Election Results 1832-1885*, London 1977, pp.xv and 622.
4. That is, 1951 when Labour and the Conservatives won the same number of seats in Scotland.
5. By a 'winning election' is meant (here and throughout the chapter) an election in which the party in question won more seats than any other party—even though it may not have won an absolute majority of seats, may not have received most votes, and may not have formed the Government. Thus the Conservatives' won the 1923 election, in the

sense that they achieved more seats than any other party, though Baldwin's government was in a minority in the new Parliament and was soon defeated by a combination of Liberal and Labour MPs.

6. See D.E. Butler and A. Sloman *British Political Facts 1900-79*, London, 1980, p.145 for the regional results of 1900-79. Regional results for earlier elections calculated from F.W.S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results 1832-85*, London 1977, and F.W.S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results 1885-1918*, London, 1974.
7. The definition of these regions and their boundaries is that used by Butler and Sloman *British Political Facts*, p.212. That is, the north is composed of the 'old' counties of Cheshire, Lancashire, Yorkshire and the counties to their north; the midlands consists of Hereford, Worcestershire, Warwickshire, Northants, Lincolnshire, Notts, Leicestershire, Staffordshire, Salop and Derbyshire; the south consists of the rest of England (including London).
8. That is, excluding Northern Ireland and, in 1934, all the University seats.
9. See R.M. Punnett 'Regional Partisanship and the Legitimacy of British Governments' *Parliamentary Affairs*, 1984 pp.140-58, for a fuller discussion of these points.
10. R.M. Punnett 'Must Governments Lose? British Inter- Party Competition in Comparative Perspective', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 1981, pp.392-408.
11. For these calculations a 'change of government' is confined to a change in the party composition of the government : changes of Prime Minister within the same party are ignored.
12. That is, the Unionist Government 1895-1905, the Liberal Government 1905-15, the National Government 1931-40 and the Conservative Government 1951-64.